

Teachers' Awareness and Utilization of Play Activities in Teaching Preschool Children in Nsukka Urban, Enugu State

Ezeonyeche, C. L. & Okechukwu, F. O.
Department of Home Science and Management
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

This study investigated teachers' awareness and utilization of play activities in teaching preschool children in Nsukka Urban, Enugu State. Descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population consisted of 120 kindergarten teachers in the 52 government approved preschools in Nsukka Urban. A sample of 60 kindergarten teachers was randomly selected. Questionnaire was used for data collection. Data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Findings reveal that most of the preschool teachers were not aware of play activities for teaching preschool children. Findings reveal that teachers were aware of nine activities including among others rhymes that teach numbers and alphabets (89.5%), and songs that teach shapes and colors (70.2%). Also there is poor utilization rate of play activities among the preschool teachers. The government, private operators and preschool teachers should provide enabling environment, encourage and allow children choose the activity they want while the teachers observe and assist preschoolers. Provision of standard preschool environment/facilities, improve awareness and utilization of play activities by preschool teachers will greatly ensure holistic development of children.

Key words: Teachers, Play, Preschool, Preschoolers, Children.

Introduction

Education is the process of developing knowledge and ability in learners towards formation and modification of their behaviors for the benefit of the society. Consequently, most countries of the world have provided various educational programmes for their citizens because education is conceived as the greatest

legacy that any nation can confer to her children who are the future leaders. Children are the touchstone of a healthy and sustainable society, how they are nurtured has significant influence on how they will grow, prosper and be viewed by others (Ibiam, 2016). Children go through distinct stages of development including: infancy and toddler-hood;

preschool; middle childhood; and adolescence (Laura, 2003). Preschool age corresponds to a critical period of physical, cognitive and psychosocial development of the child. The quality and intensity of care, nutrition and stimulation a child receives during this period determines to a large extent the level of physical and cognitive development the child can attain (Adenipekun, 2004).

Preschool children are children between ages of three and five that attend preschools commonly called nursery or kindergarten. Some of the characteristics preschoolers typically display include: curiosity, gaining strength and coordination, cause and effect experimentation, memory skill increase, display of independence, engage in pretend play, ask lots of questions, and lots more (Segal, Bardige, Woika and Leinfelder, 2006). In view of the characteristics of preschoolers and their need for stimulation and activities, the need for provision of enabling environment which will provide them with opportunities and age appropriate facilities for play, stimulate learning and be appropriate for physical activities is indispensable (Amirat, Abdl-Aziz and Salwa, 2014). Such child friendly environment is made available in the preschool programmes.

Preschool programme is an educational establishment offering early childhood education to children prior to their entering the primary school (Stephens, 2013). Preschool

education is a foundation that helps to shape and improve the children's lives, their potentialities and personalities towards self-actualization, training and modeling and it also focuses on children learning through play (Ibiam, 2016). Preschools have lots of activities that are fun and entertaining for the preschoolers; activities that help them in developing gross and fine motor skills (Catherine, 2012). These activities help to mold and channel preschooler's growth and set the foundation for better learning and development. They also help to build preschoolers' confidence and make them well rounded individuals. Seeds for a lifelong love for learning are planted in preschoolers with interesting preschool activities organized and supervised by their teachers (Okechukwu & Anyakoha, 2016).

A teacher is a person who provides education for children and facilitates their learning; he or she must have obtained specified professional qualifications or credentials from a university or college. The role of teachers is often formal and ongoing, carried out in the school or other place of formal education (Wright, 2011).

The early years of life are the best opportunity to lay the foundations for a child's future. By getting it right in early childhood, the seeds for tomorrow's engaged active student, productive and skilled worker, confident and loving parents are planted (Council of Australian

Government, 2009). According to Segal, et.al, (2006) each stage of development of the child has teaching strategies appropriate for it depending on the capabilities of children in that stage. Walker and Bass (2014) noted that research unequivocally demonstrates that if a solid, intentional, play based curriculum with a rich creative environment and highly professional educators in the field can be provided, children will receive quality early childhood education that will influence and impact on their lives and learning in the future.

From children's own perspective, play and learning are not separate. Play-based curriculum primarily involves allowing the pupils to learn and explore at their own pace. This helps the teachers to identify different abilities of each pupil and thus pay particular attention to their peculiar needs with respect to their mental and psychomotor development (Anderson-Mcnamee, 2010). The roles of the teachers are to observe and provide interesting materials that promote exploration and learning (Anderson-Mcnamee, 2010). Play is a physical or mental leisure activity that is undertaken purely for enjoyment which often has behavioral, social and psychomotor rewards (Play Therapy, 2007). It is an activity that is self chosen and self directed, intrinsically motivated, guided by mental rules, imaginative, and conducted in an active, alert but relatively non-stressed frame of mind (Gray, 2008).

There are many benefits to play. Research shows that 75% of brain development occurs after birth and play helps with that development by stimulating the brain through the formation of connections between nerve cells. This process helps with the development of fine and gross motor skills as well as development of language and socialization skills (Anderson-Mcnamee, 2010). Children increase their problem-solving abilities and an understanding of size, shape, and texture through games and puzzles. A review of several studies showed that play is significantly related to creative problem-solving, co-operative behavior, logical thinking, IQ scores, and peer group popularity. Play enhances the progress of early development from 33% to 67% by increasing adjustment, improving language and reducing social and emotional problems (Fisher, 1992). Indeed, play is such an instrumental component to healthy child development that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) named play as a central component in developmentally appropriate educational practices; and the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights (1989) recognized play as a fundamental right of every child.

Despite the benefits derived from play for children, time for free play has been markedly reduced in schools. Children today receive less support for play than did previous generations mostly because of a more hurried

lifestyle, changes in family structure, over protection and increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free play (Pappas 2011). Ndukwe (2002) found that most preschools in Enugu State lack adequate games, recreational space and facilities. The researchers observed during their visits to some preschools in the study area that most preschools do not have child friendly environment, lack space and facilities to encourage play activities in the preschools. As a result, use of play way approach for preschoolers becomes difficult if not impossible; leading to teachers adopting other methods for teaching children.

Foundation of anything is very crucial to its growth and development. Poor academic performance has been attributed to poor education foundation due to poor teaching standards during early years of life Aremu (2003). National survey showed that about 50% of children aged 3-5 years lack access to any form of organized early childhood education program. Only 20% of children aged 3-5 years are participating in organized early childhood care programmes most of which are not child-friendly preschool centers (Federal Ministry of Health, 2010). This has been attributed to poor academic performance at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. This is evident in the result of a study conducted by Arong and Ogbadu (2010), which showed that

over 50% of primary school pupils used for the study were unable to write their own names. Because of the great importance that education has on national development, this poor performance is a source of concern to parents, educators, government and administrators. Since education at preschool level is the bedrock and the foundation towards higher knowledge, and an instrument that fosters the worth and development of the individual for further education and development, there is a need to examine the utilization of play activities in teaching children at the foundation years in the study area.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of this study was to explore teachers' awareness and utilization of play activities in teaching preschool children in Nsukka urban. Specifically, this study:

1. determined teachers awareness of play activities for preschoolers
2. identified the play activities utilized by preschool teachers in teaching preschoolers

Research Questions

The study answered the following research questions:

1. What play activities for preschoolers are teachers aware of?
2. What play activities do teachers utilize for preschoolers?

Methodology

Design of the study: The study adopted a Descriptive Survey Research design.

Area of the study: The Study was conducted in Nsukka Urban, Nsukka local government area, Enugu state. Nsukka Urban is about 15 Kilometers from the Northern border of the state. It is in this section that University of Nigeria Nsukka is situated. Nsukka urban has 52 government approved preschools (Nsukka Local Government Education Unit, May, 2015).

Population for the study: The population consisted of 120 kindergarten teachers in 52 government approved preschools in Nsukka urban. Their minimum qualification in education was Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSCE/WASC), age 18years, with not less than five years teaching experience.

Sample for the Study: A sample of 60 female preschool teachers was randomly drawn from the population. Fifty percent (50%) of the 52 preschools (a total of 26 schools) were randomly selected from the list of schools secured from Nsukka Local Government Area Education Office (2015). Secondly, all the female teachers in the sampled 26 preschools were used for the study (60 female preschool teachers).

Instrument for Data Collection: Instrument used for this study was a structured questionnaire on teachers' awareness and utilization of play activities in teaching preschool children in Nsukka Urban. The questionnaire contained questions on teachers' background information

relevant to the study (Section 1), teachers' awareness of play activities (Section 2) and teachers' utilization of play activities (Section 3). The instrument was validated by three lecturers in the Department of Home Science and Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Data Collection Techniques: Data was collected by the help of two trained research assistants within four weeks. The trained assistants with the researchers distributed and retrieved sixty (60) questionnaires from the respondents. This is a 100% return rate. Due to incomplete information, three questionnaires were discarded and only 57 copies were used for data analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques: The data collected was analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Frequency and percentage were used to present results on teachers' awareness of play activities while mean and standard deviation were used to present results on teachers' utilization of play activities in preschools in Nsukka urban. Means that are equal to and above 2.50 were regarded as often used and those below 2.5 were regarded as not often used.

Results

Background Information on the Respondents

From the study, majority of the teachers (57.9%) were from private schools, 36.8% were from government owned schools while 5.3% of them

were from organization owned schools.

The study also further reviewed that majority of the teachers (40.4%) had 11-20 years teaching experience, 22.8% of them had above 20 years, 19.3% had 6-10 years and 17.5% of them had about 5 years teaching experience.

The educational qualifications of the teachers revealed that 33.3% of the teachers had NCE/OND certificate, 26.3% had B.Sc/B.Ed/HND, 17.5% had TCII, 14.0% had senior school certificate while only 8.9% of them had M.Sc/M.Ed as their educational qualification. None of the teachers had PhD, and FSLC.

The study also showed that 38.6% of the teachers had training in early childhood development while the

other 61.4% of the teachers did not have training in the area of early childhood development. Among those that had the training 45.5% of them obtained the training from courses in the University/colleges of education, 36.4% of them got the knowledge from attending workshops/conferences while 18.1% got theirs from reading books.

From the study, 43.9% of the teachers had over 25 children under their care, 38.6% of the teachers had 15 - 25 children under their care and 17.5% of the teachers had 8 - 15 children under their care.

Research Question One: Are teachers aware of play activities for teaching preschoolers?

Table 1 - Percentage Responses on preschool teachers' awareness on play activities used for teaching preschoolers in Nsukka Urban

S/N	Play Activities for Children	Yes F (%)	No F (%)
Children:			
1	go outside in the field and play freely	14(24.6)	43(75.4)
2	dance around while singing different nursery rhymes	39(68.4)	18(31.6)
3	play with sand and water	15(26.3)	42(73.7)
4	chase butterfly and pick flowers	11(19.3)	46(80.7)
5	play with teddy bears and soft toys indoor	27(47.4)	30(52.6)
6	play outside with tricycles, swings, dome climbers, ladders and merry go round	25(43.9)	32(56.1)
7	play games involved rolling, skipping and hopping for physical development	21(36.8)	36(63.2)
8	play with puzzles and building blocks for physical and cognitive development	39(68.4)	18(31.6)
9	scribble on paper with large crayons and colored pencils	13(22.8)	44(77.2)
10	play for a very long time during school hours while the teacher observes	12(21.1)	45(78.9)
11	pick leaves and count fruits on the tree	19(33.3)	38(66.7)

12	identify their body parts while singing parts of the body rhyme	49(86.0)	8(14.0)
13	choose the activity they want and play how they want while the teacher observes	10(17.5)	47(82.5)
14	practice finger painting for pre-reading and pre-writing skills development	38(66.7)	19(33.3)
15	use poster colors with brush to paint on easel/thick paper	25(43.9)	32(56.1)
16	sing rhymes that teach numbers and alphabets	51(89.5)	6(10.5)
17	use materials such as cartons, papers tape, scissors and gum for construction of objects	15(26.3)	42(73.7)
18	use paper cutouts and flannel board to tell stories	25(43.9)	32(56.1)
19	sing songs that teach shapes and colors	40(70.2)	17(29.8)
20	dress up and groom dolls for dramatic play	10(17.5)	47(82.5)
21	use clay and play dough to mould objects	15(26.3)	42(73.7)
22	cut out objects from books and paste on a board/box	20(35.1)	37(64.9)
23	stack blocks and fit cubes together to form a construction	25(43.9)	32(56.1)
24	sort objects in class according to size, color and shape	38(66.7)	19(33.3)
25	put different spices in a scent bottle/box to smell	5(8.8)	42(73.7)
26	sing songs that teach days of the week and months of the year	37(64.9)	20(35.1)
27	string large beads/buttons/macaroni on thick thread	10(17.5)	47(82.5)
28	cut out scraps of different textures and paste on a box/board	18(31.6)	39(68.4)
29	tell stories while looking at picture books	35(61.4)	22(38.6)

Note: F = frequency, % = percentage, Sample size (N) = 57

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage responses on teachers' awareness of play activities used for teaching preschoolers. The Table shows that nine items had yes responses above 50% such as children: sing rhymes that teach numbers and alphabets (89.5%), identify their body parts while singing (86.6%) and sort

objects in the classroom according to sizes, colors and shapes (66.7%). On the other hand, the teachers answered 'no' above 50% in 21 items such as children: dress up and groom dolls for dramatic play (82.2%), chase butterflies and pick leaves (80.7%), choose the activity they want and play how they want (82.5%), among others.

Research Question Two: Do teachers utilize play activities for preschoolers?

Table 2 – Mean and standard deviation responses on play activities teachers utilize in teaching preschoolers in Nsukka Urban.

S/ N	Play Activities for Children	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remarks
Children:				
1	go outside in the field and play freely	2.52	0.83	Often
2	dance around while singing different nursery rhymes	2.76	0.77	Often
3	play with sand and water	2.34	0.55	Not often
4	chase butterfly and pick flowers	2.41	0.74	Not often
5	play with teddy bears and soft toys indoor	2.39	0.72	Not often
6	play outside with tricycles, swings, dome climbers, ladders and merry go round	3.21	0.77	Often
7	play games involved rolling, skipping and hopping for physical development	3.04	0.79	Often
8	play with puzzles and building blocks for physical and cognitive development	2.23	0.84	Not often
9	scribble on paper with large crayons and colored pencils	2.65	0.51	Often
10	play for a very long time during school hours while the teacher observes	2.22	0.94	Not often
11	pick leaves and count fruits on the tree	2.10	1.73	Not often
12	identify their body parts while singing parts of the body rhyme	3.31	0.83	Often
13	choose the activity they want and play how they want while the teacher observes	2.01	1.61	Not often
14	practice finger painting for pre-reading and pre-writing skills development	2.44	0.79	Not often
15	use poster colors with brush to paint on easel/thick paper	2.34	0.84	Not often
16	sing rhymes that teach numbers and alphabets	3.55	0.33	Often
17	use materials such as cartons, papers tape, scissors and gum for construction of objects	2.43	0.55	Not often
18	use paper cutouts and flannel board to tell stories	2.51	1.07	Often
19	sing songs that teach shapes and colors	2.97	0.51	Often
20	dress up and groom dolls for dramatic play	1.81	0.55	Not often
21	use clay and play dough to mould objects	1.95	1.39	Not often
22	cut out objects from books and paste on a board/box	2.19	0.14	Not often
23	stack blocks and fit cubes together to form a construction	2.25	1.74	Not often
24	sort objects in class according to size, color and shape	2.56	1.10	Often

25	put different spices in a scent bottle/box to smell	1.57	0.67	Not often
26	sing songs that teach days of the week and months of the year	3.21	1.19	Often
27	string large beads/buttons/macaroni on thick thread	2.03	0.92	Not often
28	cut out scraps of different textures and paste on a box/board	2.13	0.88	Not often
29	tell stories while looking at picture books	2.78	0.95	Often

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation responses on play activities teachers utilize for preschoolers in Nsukka Urban. The Table shows that the respondents utilized twelve activities often they include children: play outside freely, dance around while singing nursery rhymes, children play outside with swings and dome climbers, children play games involving rolling and skipping, children scribble with large crayons, sing songs that teach shapes and colors and tell stories while looking at picture books, among others. The respondents did not utilize seventeen activities often. These include children; play with sand and water, chase butterflies and pick flowers, play with soft toys, children play with puzzles and building blocks, pick leaves and count fruits, choose the activity they want, dress up and groom dolls for dramatic play, put different spices in a scent bottle/box to smell and string large beads/buttons/macaroni on thick thread, among others.

Discussion of Findings

Table 1 showed the percentage responses on teachers' awareness on

the use of play activities for preschoolers. Majority of the teachers were not aware of the use of play activities for teaching preschoolers. Respondents who were aware of using play activities for preschoolers, 89.50% of the respondents were aware of children using rhymes that teach numbers and alphabets, 70.20% responded to children singing songs that teach shapes and colours, while 64.90% of them responded to children sing songs that teaches the days of the week and months of the year among others as play activities for teaching preschoolers. This is in line with what Wallace (2012) said that music and creative movements are important for a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development. The table also showed that 73.70% to 82.50% of the respondents said 'no' to children choosing the activity they want and playing how they want, dressing up and grooming dolls for dramatic play, and also using clay and play dough to mould objects as learning activity. This is contrary to what Scott (2009) and Bodrova, Gameroth & Leong (2010) said that children are the ones to choose the activity they want as this will make them stay on the activity

longer and hence develop their attention span. It is also contrary to the stipulations of Bergan (2002) that dramatic play is essential for language and social development. Hyvonen (2011) also stated that play covers a wide range of social, cognitive, emotional and physical activities that is of great help to holistic development of the child.

Table 2 showed the mean and standard deviation responses on teachers' utilization of play activities for preschool children. From the table, the respondents do not allow children to initiate activities often. The response is contrary to the stipulations of Scott (2009) and Bodrova, et.al (2010) that children develop their attention span and focus by choosing the activity they want and playing how they want. This could also be attributed to the findings of Ndukwe (2002) that most preschools in Enugu State lack adequate games and recreational facilities. As a result, utilization of play activities for preschoolers has become difficult if not impossible; leading to teachers adopting other methods for teaching children. Also, children are not allowed to take part in dramatic play, this is against the opinion of Bergan (2002) that make-believe play is a vital context for the development of self-regulation because it involves emotion, cognition, language and sensory-motor actions; and thus may promote the development of dense synaptic connections. The respondents however, allow children practice

singing activities often and some few other activities this is in line with the stipulations of Wallace (2012) that singing and creative movements are essential for physical and language development. Murata and Maeda (2002) emphasized that Physical activities are essential for all preschoolers, and they learn best when directly involved with their environment. This involvement can be manifested through daily physical education activities. Through developmentally appropriate physical education activities, strong foundation of fundamental motor skills (e.g., jumping, throwing, and running) can be built. It is with this foundation that preschoolers become physically active adults who are knowledgeable of how their bodies move with potential collateral benefits toward developing for sport-specific skills. Karen (2012) in differing with the findings of the present study said that young children are curious beings, discovering and investigating the world around them. They use their senses seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching to accomplish their tasks. Play is the tool for this work—the tool young children use to explore the mysteries of the physical and social worlds. In play, children learn collaboration and conflict resolution with friends as they investigate the properties of equipment, materials, and routines. Through the phenomenon of play, children develop and learn as they participate in activities in every area of the classroom. Play affords children

the ability to improve their language, social, physical, math, science, and thinking skills. The development and enhancement of these skills promotes their self-esteem.

Conclusion

This study has shown that majority of the preschools in Nsukka urban are owned by private individuals. Majority of the teachers have basic literacy certificates (TCIL, WASC, NCE/OND), though had no formal training in the area of early childhood education and care. A greater percentage of the teachers have teaching experience between 11 - 20 years. The teachers were not very aware of what constitutes play activities for teaching preschoolers. All important learning approach (play-way) for preschoolers was not adequately utilized in Nsukka Urban.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- ❖ the State Ministry of Education for early childhood education should have vibrant and functional committee to oversee pre-primary school programmes, facilities, personnel qualification among others in the area.
- ❖ private operators of pre-primary schools should work with the stipulated government standards for preschools such as adequate space for play, facilities, and teachers' qualifications among others.

- ❖ preschool teachers should encourage children to engage in free play while they support and supervise them to make the exercise fruitful and rewarding for children.
- ❖ parents through the Parents Teachers Association (PTA) should encourage the government, private operators, and preschool teachers to ensure that child friendly environment, facilities and activities are put in place to enhance optimal development of children.

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